

VZCZCXRO9078
OO RUEHROV
DE RUEHDS #0381/01 0421847
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 111847Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3758
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUZEFAA/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEPADJ/CJTF HOA PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 ADDIS ABABA 000381

NOFORN
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR INR/I

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/10/2019

TAGS: [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [ET](#) [ER](#)

SUBJECT: ETHNIC INSURGENCY AND POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN
ETHIOPIA (C-AL8-02523)

REF: STATE 9165

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S/NF) This cable responds to reftel request for information on political opposition and ethnic insurgent movements in Ethiopia.

1A. (C) WHAT POLITICAL OPPOSITION GROUPS ARE ACTIVE IN ETHIOPIA? ARE ANY OF THEM LOOKING TO MERGE AND PRESENT A CHALLENGE TO THE GOVERNMENT IN 2010?

-- Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ): UDJ is the main successor of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), the main opposition coalition that contested in the 2005 elections. UDJ is Ethiopia's first and only political party with truly a national complexion, having members from almost all of Ethiopia's regions and ethnic groups, including Oromos, Amharas, Tigrayans, Somalis, and Afaris. It is also the first party to elect a female Chair. The GoE arrested and revoked the pardon of UDJ's Chairwoman Judge Birtukan Midekssa on December 29. (See 2008 ADDIS 1733).

-- United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF): The UEDF was the second largest opposition coalition contesting the 2005 national elections. It is a coalition of parties holding just over a dozen seats in parliament. UEDF is led by Dr. Beyene Petros, a Tulane University graduate, who is also the Chairman of the Ethiopian Social Democratic Federal Party (ESDFP). The other major party that has been a member of the UEDF is the Oromo People's Congress (OPC) which is now on the brink of joining into a coalition with the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM). While it remains unclear how an OPC-OFDM coalition might affect UEDF, Dr. Beyene will likely continue to lead UEDF and the UEDF coalition will likely continue to be a political force rather than any of its component sub-parties emerging as a influential power unto itself.

-- Oromo People's Congress (OPC): OPC is the largest Oromo party in Ethiopia and has roughly 37 seats in parliament. OPC's leaders, including Chairman Dr. Merera Gudina, campaigned under the Oromo National Congress (ONC) label as part of the UEDF coalition in 2005. In late 2005, the National Electoral Board granted the ONC name to a little known ONC MP Tolosa Tesfaye despite the party's general assembly, and 37 of the party's 39 MPs, having endorsed Merera as Chairman. Unable to counter the NEB decision, Merera and his supporters established the OPC in early-2006 and the ONC has become effectively defunct.

-- Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM): The second largest Oromo party, OFDM is led by Bulcha Demeksa. This 76 year old MP was Deputy Finance Minister under the Emperor, a one-time UNDP ResRep, former Director of a bank, and now leads OFDM with its nine seats in parliament. OFDM just announced a coalition with OPC. (See 2008 ADDIS 3371).

-- Arena Tigray for Democracy and Sovereignty (ATDS): This, the first Tigrayan opposition party, was formed in October 2007 by its Chairman Gebru Asrat. Gebru was a TPLF freedom fighter with Meles, former TPLF Central Committee member, and former president of Tigray region. He sided against Meles over Eritrea in the 2001 rift in the TPLF and was banished from the party. (See 2008 ADDIS 86).

-- All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP): AEUP is an increasingly minor Amhara opposition party. Under its Chairman Engineer Hailu Shawel, AEUP was the core member of the CUD coalition in 2005. Most major CUD leaders have since broken with Hailu and many view him as an Amhara nationalist, focused on just seizing power for himself, and playing an unconstructive role in Ethiopian politics. AEUP still has significant diaspora support. (See 2008 ADDIS 2560).

-- Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP): Many CUD leaders who were not arrested in 2005 attempted to re-form the coalition as a party under the CUDP name. Ayele Chamisso, a little known city council member-elect from CUD, emerged as a potential co-chair, but we quickly perceived by others in the party and international community as having

ADDIS ABAB 00000381 002 OF 005

been co-opted by the government. After most major CUD leaders broke away into a splinter, the NEB awarded the CUDP name to Ayele, forcing the others to form UDJ. We believe that Ayele is under Ethiopian Government (GoE) influence. He has minimal support, and that is strictly limited to parts of Addis Ababa.

-- Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party-Medhin (EDUP-Medhin): EDUP-Medhin was one of the four parties within the CUD, but broke from the coalition as it tried to form itself as a party. EDUP-Medhin, tries to present itself as a "third path" that presents a loyal opposition while acknowledging that the ruling party has not been all bad for Ethiopia. The rest of the opposition, however, refuses to be in the same room with EDUP-Medhin Chairman Lidetu Ayalew as they widely view him as also having been co-opted by the GoE -- a view many in the diplomatic community share.

-- Forum for Democratic Dialogue (FDD): FDD emerged in June 2008 as a loose group of opposition parties composed of UEDF, OPC, OFDM, Arena Tigray, the Somali Democratic Alliance Forces (SDAF), and two prominent political figures: former President of Ethiopia Dr. Negasso Gidada and former Defense Minister Seeye Abraha. We understand that UDJ finally joined FDD on February 8, 2009. FDD is slowly developing a minimal common political platform and increasingly looks to consolidate itself into a political coalition to compete against the ruling party in 2010. (See 2008 ADDIS 1746 and 2009 ADDIS 292).

1B. (S/NF) TO WHAT EXTENT ARE ETHNIC INSURGENTS OR DOMESTIC OPPOSITION GROUPS PLOTTING TO USURP THE REGIME?

-- With the possible exception of AEUP, we assess that none of the legal opposition parties operating in Ethiopia are plotting to "usurp" the regime. While AEUP may want to, it fundamentally lacks the capability and support. We assess that the other opposition parties noted in response A above genuinely believe that they could govern Ethiopia better, but are committed to assuming authority through peaceful, constitutional, and electoral means. To varying degrees each party, and members of each party, may believe that the Ethiopian people either fundamentally oppose the ruling party

or support them. This assumption may impact their perceptions of the credibility of future polls.

There are several ethnic insurgent groups that have expressed overtly a desire to topple the Ethiopian regime by force. Most prominent among them is the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), both of which had partnered with the ruling party during its struggle against the Derg or early in the current regime's reign. Both took up arms against the regime in response to their perception of the regime's marginalization of their leaders or people or due to the regime's refusal to honor power-sharing pledges. While OLF had been able to conduct one-off strikes against state targets several years ago, we have not seen evidence linking them to any such strikes in the past few years. While we believe that the OLF enjoys broad public support from Ethiopia's Oromo population in principle, we have not seen evidence that it is capable of a concerted assault against the regime adequate to pose a threat to stability in and of itself. (See 2008 ADDIS 3188).

While the ONLF has been able to conduct targeted strikes against GoE entities and supporters in the Somali region of Ethiopia, it too lacks the capacity to pose a meaningful threat to the regime in Addis Ababa. We assess that the ONLF enjoys broad public support among the relatively small Ogadeni Somali population in Ethiopia. Other smaller ethnic insurgencies follow the same trend of taking up arms against the GoE on behalf of ethnic groups in response to their perceived marginalization. The Sidama Liberation Front (SLF) in the south, the ethnically-Amhara Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front (EPPF), the Tigray People's Democratic Front (TPDF), the Southern Ethiopia People's Front for Justice and Equality (SEPFJE), and the Benishangul People's Movement (BPM) are all little known such movements. None of these poses a significant credible threat to the regime, but each can disrupt ruling party or GoE activities in their respective locales.

ADDIS ABAB 00000381 003 OF 005

1C. (S/NF) WHAT ARE MELES'S ADVISORS TELLING HIM ABOUT DOMESTIC OPPOSITION?

-- While we have very little insights into the actual discussions within the ruling party's inner-circle, senior officials have made it clear that the regime viewed the 2005 election turn-out and aftermath as a fundamental threat to its survival. While the lack of a distinction between party, state, and government in Ethiopia's political culture led the regime to view the electoral challenge as treason, the Tigrayan elite within the regime also perceived the threat to be against Tigrayans generally. The systematic closure of political space since 2005 suggests that this perception still stands and that the regime will not take the risk of exposing itself to such a challenge again in the near term. It is clear from some of Meles's comments in Parliament that he views the Oromo opposition as closet OLF supporters out to topple the regime. We believe that UDJ's (and increasingly FDD's) combination of Amhara, Oromo, Tigrayan, and other groups -- virtually unprecedented in Ethiopia's history -- also poses a particular threat to the Tigrayan minority government that increasingly sees itself under siege. Meles's periodic public praise for Lidetu and EDUP-Medhin, in contrast, are attempts to send a message about what opposition the regime is willing to tolerate.

Meles is very isolated and his information is within a very limited void. He views first and foremost that the objective of the ruling party is survival and establishment of a state which is completely in harmony with the thinking of the party to the extent that the party will disappear, becoming redundant because everyone will think alike, follow without question, and not deviate from EPRDF/TPLF thought. Until then, opposition groups will continue to be marginalized. Meles and the government have been brutal in their response

to the ONLF, because they see the ONLF very much like a developing EPRDF/TPLF prototype. In the ONLF, no matter how weak, the government sees themselves 30 years ago, a popular based movement which could eventually overthrow the EPRDF/TPLF. It is that thought that drives them to eliminate the ONLF.

1D. (S/NF) TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE REGIME VIEW ETHNIC INSURGENTS AND POLITICAL OPPOSITION AS A THREAT TO ETHIOPIAN STABILITY?

-- We assess that the regime only perceives the political opposition as a threat to Ethiopian stability because the regime is convinced that it offers Ethiopia the only path to salvation. The regime's visceral perception of the opposition as being out to topple it, therefore is interpreted as viewing the opposition as out to undermine Ethiopia fundamentally.

We do not believe that the regime views the ethnic insurgencies currently active in Ethiopia as a threat to Ethiopian stability. While the regime would certainly see the OLF as a threat to stability if it were a legal opposition party, the OLF's sustained ineffectiveness as an insurgency has likely led the regime to see OLF more as a nuisance than a threat. Similarly, the ONLF's localized area of operations and the distance of that area from Ethiopia's center does not likely pose a threat to stability in the regime's view in and of itself. The fear of a public perception that the government is weak due to its inability to counter the ONLF, however, may represent a source of potential instability in the regime's mind. Instead, the ONLF's April 2007 strike against the Chinese oil exploration team at Abole and continued threats against foreign oil and gas explorers certainly poses a threat to the regime's development agenda due to its dampening effect in attracting foreign direct investment. While we do not believe that the regime views insurgents as a treat to stability, we assess that the government's continued focus on such groups in public comments provides a useful excuse for the regime to deploy heavy security forces in urban areas and to make politically motivated arrests with impunity.

1E. (S/NF) TO WHAT EXTENT WILL ETHIOPIA LOOK TO THE U.S. FOR INTELLIGENCE, MILITARY, FINANCIAL, AND OTHER SUPPORT TO

ADDIS ABAB 00000381 004 OF 005

ASSIST ITS COUNTERINSURGENCY EFFORTS OR OPPOSITION SUPPRESSION?

-- To the regime's chagrin, the USG has drawn a clear and consistent line in arguing that we view ethnic insurgents as separate from terrorist groups and we have attempted to put in place clear firewalls to prevent inadvertent USG support for Ethiopian efforts against such groups. We should expect the GoE to continue to lament our "double standard" of "ignoring terrorist attacks" against it from such groups. We assess that the GoE does not expect and will not look to the U.S. for support to suppress the opposition. We have seen the GoE effectively seek technical assistance and political comment from the U.S. and others in the international community on draft laws to insititutionalize the suppression of the opposition. As in the cases of the Media Law and CSO Law, the GoE appears to have effectively taken on U.S. and international comments on draft legislation to render the laws more effective and efficient in institutionalizing such opposition suppression as well as in identifying potential unintended consequences to correct.

1F. (S/NF) HAS THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN CHANGED ADDIS ABABA'S COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGY?

-- We have not seen evidence of the economic downturn affecting Addis Ababa's counterinsurgency strategy. In both the case of the threat perceived by the 2005 election turmoil and the attack on the Chinese in Abole, the regime's brutal,

visceral response seems to have a "half-life" of approximately 18 months before it adopts more strategic tactics. Much like discussions of pardon for political detainees only emerged in Spring 2007 after November 2005 arrests, the GoE began taking on more targeted strikes against the ONLF only in Fall 2008 after the scorched Earth campaign the followed the April 2007 Abole attack. As such, we assess that if a new insurgent attack were to pose a perceived threat to the regime tomorrow, we would see a lasting and overwhelming response despite the economic downturn.

1G. (S/NF) TO WHAT EXTENT IS THE GOVERNMENT CONCERNED THE DIRE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION WILL DRIVE POPULAR DISCONTENT AND PRECIPITATE ADDIS ABABA'S EVENTUAL DOWNFALL?

-- We assess that the government's efforts to prevent the release of accurate or complete information about the humanitarian situation reflects a significant degree of concern that it could fuel popular discontent. We assess that the coincidence of the humanitarian situation along with unprecedented hyper-inflation and economic stagnation exacerbate these concerns. The early 2008 diversion of emergency food stocks to suppress food prices in urban markets and the procurement of 520,000 metric tons of wheat for the urban markets in the midst of the country's worst foreign exchange crisis in a decade are further evidence of such concern. While the terrorist strikes in Somaliland and Puntland in late-October 2008 certainly spurred the massive deployment of police and the security service in Addis Ababa, that prominent and sustained deployment may also reflect an intentional effort to discourage any popular uprisings that may threaten the regime. Certainly the regime recognizes the role that the perfect recipe of drought, political authoritarianism, and economic downturn played in the downfalls of the Emperor and the Derg, and is taking all necessary steps to protect against a repeat.

1H. (S/NF) TO WHAT EXTENT DOES ERITREA SUPPORT THE OROMO LIBERATION FRONT (OLF), THE OGADENI NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT (ONLF), THE COALITION FOR UNITY AND DEMOCRACY (CUD), AND OTHER GROUPS?

-- We defer to Embassy Asmara for a response. Eritrea does provide assistance to insurgent groups from throughout the region and trains some 30 insurgent groups at camp Sawa near the Sudan border. But Eritrea must be viewed as an opportunist rather than as the main financial and training support for domestic Ethiopian insurgent groups.

1I. (S/NF) DO ETHNIC INSURGENT GROUPS RECEIVE AID FROM OTHER COUNTRIES? IF SO, WHICH COUNTRIES?

ADDIS ABAB 00000381 005 OF 005

-- We have very little credible insight into this. While OLF previously was able to operate from within Sudan, we understand that Khartoum has effectively forced them to leave. The ONLF certainly enjoys some degree of support from Ogadenis in Somalia and, to a lesser degree northwestern Kenya. As most western countries view these insurgent groups as ethnic nationalist movements rather than as terrorist groups, as do we, they are able to operate overtly and legally in the U.S., Europe, and other regions and to use their offices in such countries to raise funds and support. It is not clear to us, however, whether other countries support them.

1J. (S/NF) TO WHAT EXTENT ARE THE ETHNIC INSURGENTS WORKING WITH GROUPS IN SOMALIA INCLUDING AL-SHABAAB?

-- While the GoE may try to link domestic ethnic insurgents with bona fide terrorist groups, including al-Shabaab, we have not seen any credible information that supports that. While ONLF certainly enjoys some degree of support from their Ogadeni sub-clan kin in Somalia, it is not clear to us that

they are working with "groups" in Somalia, per se. We have seen reports of individual ONLF members cooperating or collaborating with groups such as al-Shabaab, but we assess that this reflects individual interests rather than interests of ONLF as an entity. In fact, we have received increasing anecdotal reporting of ONLF's opposition to al-Shabaab. This seems to stem from ONLF's rejection of random violence and terrorism as anathema to its own objective of struggle (albeit armed) for political rights. OLF members have told EmbOffs in the past that it had previously been able to receive arms through routes traversing Somalia, but in recent years insecurity has forced them to forego Somalia-based supply routes. While some individuals within domestic insurgent groups may support, or show sympathy to, outside extremist groups, al-Shabaab and other Somalia-based extremist groups reaching into Ethiopia largely do so independent of insurgent groups.

YAMAMOTO